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## Healthy street play on a budget: a winner from every perspective

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### Introduction

Street play has declined in recent decades due to increasing traffic and reduced independent mobility (One Poll, 2013). This paper presents two perspectives on how street play can and should be promoted for optimal health in young (and older) people. First, Alice Ferguson, Director of *Playing Out*, a resident-led Community Interest Company based in England, describes the development of a simple, elegant, low cost approach to opening up streets for play. Second, Angie Page, an academic from the University of Bristol, articulates why grassroots street play projects such as these are important to deliver the challenging public health task of increasing physical activity in young people.

### Looking out

My neighbour and I began *Playing Out* as a response to our children's lack of freedom to play independently on their own street. The volunteer-driven model of street play that we have developed helps lay the foundations for outdoor play becoming a normal part of children's everyday lives. As a low-cost intervention, it is also a very attractive means to achieve this in these times of 'austerity'.

We know that the majority of children across the UK do not achieve recommended physical activity levels (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2013). However, contrary to the predominant media message, parents are not wholly to blame for this. Society as a whole needs to take responsibility for the social and environmental conditions that have limited children's access to outdoor space, particularly our collective 'decision' to give over our cities to motorized transport. *Playing Out* reimagines the street as a public space belonging to all.

Four years ago, I was concerned that my children (then aged 4 and 8) were not getting enough informal play, interaction and physical activity. Simply sending children out to play independently was no longer the norm in my urban residential neighbourhood, as had been the case a generation ago. Getting my children outside involved escorted trips to the park, the woods or other 'safe' spaces, which, even for a parent who is aware of the importance of outdoor play, just did not happen often enough. My parents' generation did not face this dilemma – as children, we had freedom in the immediate neighbourhood. The street was an extension of home and there was always someone to play out with. In contrast, when my children were younger, our street felt a barren and unwelcoming place, dominated by traffic, which was neither a safe nor appealing place to play. To paraphrase Jane Jacobs, 'nobody enjoys being out on an empty street' (Jacobs, 1961).

An annual street party showed us how the street could be temporarily transformed simply through removing cars. However, this involved a collective effort from neighbours to organise food and activities and all parked cars had to be moved from the street. We wanted something simpler and more everyday, so we developed the *Playing Out* 'model' – an after-school partial road closure, for a prescribed and limited period of time, organised and stewarded by neighbours, solely for the purpose of providing a safe space for free play.

We initially trialled the idea on International Children's Day 2009. We did nothing other than stop through-traffic and asked residents to drive in and out at walking speed. We were really interested to see if children would want to come out or still knew how to play in the street! We didn't need to worry – of course they did. This confirmed our instinct that children's urge to play outdoors was still intact – they just needed the space and permission to do so..

*Playing Out*, the organisation/movement, grew out of that single event. We helped some other streets locally to do the same thing and then shared all of our learning via a website, making it freely available for anyone across the country to follow or adapt the model (Playing Out, nd).

*Playing Out* has now become a hub for information, contact, encouragement and advice to others wanting change for their streets and their children. We go out to streets across the city of Bristol in south west England giving hands-on support to residents. We are starting to grow a network of key resident-activators to replicate this model in other places.

The response from parents and others has been positive, with people organising playing out sessions on over 100 streets across 30 different towns and cities in the UK. Reassuringly, in all of these places, we keep finding the same thing – get rid of fast traffic and children come out and play in all kinds of ways – they respond creatively to the space and opportunity to play right outside their homes. Maybe because it is a blank canvas, the street seems to invite more variety of play than is typical in a designed playground. Although not 'hard evidence', it is telling that, during a field visit to our street, Bristol City Council's Play Manager asked, "How did you get the children to engage in so many different play types?" The answer to that question is, "We didn't, they just do (when afforded the opportunity)."

There is also something about being out on your own street that puts children in contact with other people and 'real life' in a way that differs to that in school, designated playspaces and organised activities. It gives children (and adults) a sense of community, citizenship and belonging in their own neighbourhood. The street where you live is not just public space – it is *your* space.

Many of those with responsibility for children's health and community development have been supportive. It costs them next to nothing - the main job of the authorities is simply to sanction the activity and allow people to get on with it. Bristol City Council responded to the project by piloting a 'Temporary Play Street Order', an annual licence allowing streets to hold weekly 'playing out' sessions (Bristol City Council, nd; Playing Out CIC, 2012). Several other councils have already followed suit and many more are interested.

It is clear to us that many other parents also really want this freedom back for their children and are prepared to take action to make it happen. This grassroots activity, combined with peer-to-peer support and supportive Councils, has helped the *Playing Out* idea to spread, first via word of mouth to neighbouring local streets, then via local media coverage more widely across the city of Bristol and, latterly through national media coverage across England.

Although it is not yet usual for my kids to be hanging out on the street when the road is open to cars, since the introduction of regular 'playing out' sessions, it is becoming less extraordinary. As a parent, I certainly feel much more relaxed about letting them be out there unsupervised, as do other parents on the street.

*Playing Out* is part of wider movement for change and although it can feel like we are 'up against it', what galvanises us is the fear that our children's health and happiness are seriously at risk if we do not sort this out. There is also a sense of urgency as we may be the last generation of parents who remember when playing out in the street was the norm, and so we are motivated not lose this forever.

Whilst funding cuts are never a good thing, austerity measures can be used as an additional driver to recast play as something that is not wholly reliant on funded ‘provision’ but rather, a normal part of children’s everyday lives, supported and accepted by wider society.

### **The big picture**

The *Playing Out* model that Alice has described is effective as a mechanism to promote physical activity because it allows regular access to active play, close to home, in a space which is free from risk of traffic. Economically, it is attractive as it is a low cost intervention. The cost or impact on other users, namely drivers, is also minimal because road closures take place at a time when there is little traffic. Residents can also still access the street for parking.

Promoting street play is an important intervention to promote physical activity, which complements the many existing school based interventions. Whilst school based interventions can be successful at increasing physical activity, they have limited impact beyond the school gate (van Sluijs et al. 2007). The *Playing Out* model promotes neighbourhood active play in the after school period. The timing is important as this period represents a ‘critical window’ for maximising physical activity. It is at this time that children (and parents) generally have more choice about how they spend their time and subsequently when differences in activity between those least and most active are often most marked (Page et al., 2005). However, there are few effective interventions to increase physical activity after school. Promoting street play offers a mechanism to address this for the following reasons:

- If we get children to spend more time outdoors than indoors they will be, on average, three times more active (Cooper et al. 2010).
- The greater the proximity of places to play, the more time children will spend outdoors in those places (Active Living Research, 2011).
- Children spend more time outdoors on built surfaces such as streets than they do in green space (Wheeler et al. 2010).
- Traffic is a major barrier to parents allowing their children independence to play outdoors (Jago et al. 2009)
- Fostering this independence is an important mechanism to increase physical activity as children age (Page et al. 2009; 2010).

Resurrecting regular street play therefore may be an important mechanism to increase children’s physical activity, even in times of austerity.

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